

Between II: The Long Walk

by ebonbird

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Summary: Joe's last days on earth. In this sequel to Between, Joe's death wish blazes with gory glory. Complete. Ten chapters.

1. prologue

Rating: PG. If you are not of legal age in your country (or home) to read about sex and violence and breaking the law, don't read this.

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Notes: Took me long enough. Hope it's good for you, too. Though based upon episodes 89-104 of Gatchaman this story only loosely follows those events.

>Tunes that fed this: Time Has Come Today - The Chambers Brothers, Pusher Man - Curtis Mayfield, Spanish Eyes - Back Street Boys, Never Can Say Goodbye - Jackson Five, All I Want - Angel Moon, Plenty - Sarah McLachlan, Mighty Love - The Spinners, Gymnopedie 1-3 - Eric Satie, Can I Be Your Girl - Jann Arden, Ooh Child - The 5 Stairsteps, Paint it Black - The Rolling Stones
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>May 31, 2000 <p>

2. One

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,

>But I have miles to go before I sleep.
And miles to go before I sleep.

>-Robert Frost, "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening"<p>

1.

The night was the color of insurmountable distances and he'd walked home cruel, making her take two steps for each of his one, and it was

cold in the shadow strewn cabin, the couch cheap and lumpy, but Joe didn't mind. The girl in his lap held him close. Her name was Jun. He had known her for most of his life and she smelled wonderful; the warmth and weight of her against his chest and arms and pelvis unexpectedly right.

She'd found him at the crossroads of the Catalina Highway and one of the state roads.

He'd tried to ignore her. She'd put her palm to his face, questioning him with a breath-thin touch. He'd had to close his eyes and for the first time in hours his mind had not shown him his parents broken and bleeding on the sand. Their assassin looming over them, lower lip gleaming and perverse as she laughed and laughed; lipstick smudge on one side twisted front tooth; yellow hair thick and tattered in the wind; a rose, too red, too large and too still to be natural, cupped in her hand.

He kissed Jun harder. She curled around him like a flower, wrapping him in softness and the satin rustling of her hair. He heard the rasp of her tongue over the stubble on his chin. Remembered the caw of a dozen seagulls on a beach thousands of miles away.

"Joe," she breathed.

He answered to 'Joe.' Signed official documents 'Joe'. But the name, said that way, by her mouth, in those circumstances reminded him that when he was eight years old he'd had a different name and lived in another country.

Jun thought it a game. But then he said, "I'm dying." And Goosepimples bloomed under his touch.

He added, "I don't have much time."

Jun was stroking him. Her fingers went down his arm, lifted off his wrist. She clasped her hands together rested them between her thighs.

She said, "I know." For a moment he thought he heard her wrong, but Jun said it again, "I know."

He felt his center of gravity fall away. His intestines contracted into cool nothingness. He could see inside of himself. Envisioned it as a deep and darkly glittering sea, wide as the sky in Arizona was wide, and something pale, and long, and curved and monstrous rolled within it, scaled body breaking the waves. The edges of things, like the breast in his hand, and his fingers around it, blurred. And the worst of all possible things happened: she started to cry.

He tasted metal. Thought of hurting her, really giving her a reason to cry, but a quiet rushing filled his head, blanketing his thoughts with a physical awareness so acute that every sensory perception was a sacrament. The blood salt in his mouth. The smell and texture of her tears, the stick of cheap fabric upholstery against his skin, the gentle rattle of the dull plastic blinds, moved by a stray gust of wind, and the accompanying smell of rain. He took in everything long enough for his legs to go numb beneath her, and for the draft in the room to make him very cold.

Still Jun wept, hiding her face behind her hands like a little girl.

He concentrated. Formed the word with precision. Said, "Jun," his voice a little hoarse.

Jun's weeping surged into a wail, diminished. The mask of her hands tightened, drawing his attention to the path of her tears. Silver scar over gray velvet cheeks. Vanished behind the tender point of her chin. Reappeared as stray drops slicking her belly, starring the fly of her jeans and his.

Heat gathered in his chest.

Joe put his hand to his jaw. Rubbed his face. Inhaled. There was a smell. It was on his fingers, in his hair. He inhaled softly and found that it was in his mouth. He lifted his hand and settled it on the inner bend of her elbow, left it there for a moment before sliding it up the length of her upper arm. Joe closed his hand around her shoulder, cleared his throat, and said with more insistence, "Jun."

Behind her straggling hair her lips thinned. "When were you and Nambu going to tell us?"

"We weren't."

"Oh." A short harsh sound crumbled from her throat. "You had a plan."

Yep. Less than a day ago Joe had had a plan. Aside from the unmasking Berg Katse part, the plan went to shit. Nambu got captured by Galactor. Joe got his cover blown. Ken had to save the day and Katse got away.

"Nambu's a great one for secret plans."

Another short harsh sound, a nasty almost laugh followed by words in a minuscule whisper, "Jokes." She inhaled, her breath rotten with incipient tears.

Joe watched as his fingers touched themselves to her cheek, smoothed back her hair. The thumb, the thumb of his left hand, smoothed itself onto the divot in her chin. Their eyes met over his uncertain touch.

"There isn't anything we can do, is there?" she said, her eyes huge and wet and pleading, but wasn't a question.

"Fuck it," he whispered. Moisture dampened the corners of his eyes. He shut them tight.

The couch creaked. Felt Jun's weight shift, her arms brush his shoulders, she seized the cushion behind his back. She hauled herself tight against him, plowing over the worst of the deep tissue bruises on his thigh. Sensation, delicious and harsh shattered across his senses. His mouth opened on a gasp. He forced his hand into it.

In silence Jun wrapped herself around him, arms and legs and hands. Jun pulled cushions from the couch and onto the floor. In silence,

she lowered herself and Joe onto them. In silence, Joe made it difficult, holding her too close, avoiding the lips and thumbs with which she tried to wipe the wetness from his face. She put her hand to his chest. Blunt and smooth, his nose grazed her ear, his breath an artless whispering.

His hand reached between them, found the zip of her fly, tugged down; separated loosened cloth from skin by slipping his hand between. She helped him, with her jeans and his. Bit her lip at the clank of her belt buckle, the very loud sound of worn denim and stiff being drawn along tight skin. He pushed her legs apart. Her eyes were open. He stopped, turned his face to the cushion they were lying on and sighed.

Stroking his head, Jun whispered. "It's okay."

Joe looked up at her through the shaggy ruff of his hair and with immense tenderness kissed her over her heart.

3. Two

2.

Jun considered what Joe had said, and how he'd said it.

Sprawled on his back, Joe lay in the same uncomfortable position he'd assumed when he'd settled down for the flight, his left hand dangling off the edge of the flight couch.

She touched him, folding all her fingers around two of his. Involuntarily his eyes narrowed. Her teeth met behind her suddenly tight closed lips. He pulled his hand away, rolled to a sitting position. Scrutinized her with those eyes of his; intense, penetrating eyes. Wicked blue. Wordlessly, he took her hand between his, chafed it a little, and sadly, smiled. It was small, hardly moved the lines of his face out of their default 'back-off' expression, but it was there.

It amazed her. Jun swung her legs off the couch and searched his face, swallowing rapidly and making herself sit and be silent because she wanted to scream and jump up and down and hold him and rock him in her arms. He was happy, oh, a part of him was happy and she would be content with that. She would hold onto that and not be unhappy.

She would.

She was going to say something, something important when Ken spoke drawing her attention away from Joe.

"Is this it?" Ken asked Ryu of the empty expanse of ocean below them.

Jun released Joe's hand, and went to look. The sky was overcast. The water rising up in jagged little waves, thrown into one another from the wind and the blast of the God Phoenix's engines.

Ryu nodded and said, "Yep," flying the God Phoenix into the Sea of Japan. He was an excellent pilot but sweat beaded his upper lip as he

maneuvered down into the darkening depths, through the gap in the crevasse and into the utter darkness of the artificial trench of the former Galactor outpost.

Nambu's staticky message was brief. They were to rest until further notice.

"I'm on the clock." Joe told Jun when she followed him after their debriefing and retired to his cramped, dank quarters, with the station's current surveillance reports.

Joe's sleep was bad. Blindsiding him as soon as he rested his head against the bolster and pulled the flat screen terminal atop his chest. His body loosened beneath accumulated injuries and too little rest. His thoughts fractured as he drifted in and out of consciousness. In all his life he had never been so physically miserable. The worry mark between his eyes lifted for the brief moment when true sleep took him beyond his physical aches.

Biting back a moan, Joe dreamed.

Rose water, jasmine, vetiver, of Maria Brunelli, his mother's perfume, scenting her hair, down for once and over her shoulder, tickling his face as she tucked the sheets around him. Her fingers were cool on his eyes as she kissed his cheek and said, "sleep."

Waiting until he was sure his parents had settled in for the night, he got up to walk the house, checking door- handles and window latches, peering through gaps in the drapes, and counting cars, familiar and strange as they drove by the gate at the long end of the drive. He walked and walked until his feet stumbled over each other and he had to sit. Stationing himself beside the master bedroom door, and needing to pray.

"Our father," he murmured. "Our father," and there were tears in his eyes. He couldn't remember the words. If he could remember the words then the bad thing would go away. "Hail Mary," he whispered. "Our Father full of -" He came awake with his calf bumping along Papa's thigh, his face on Papa's shoulder, Papa carrying him back to his room.

Joe needed to lift his arm and scream at the blindness coming over him, taking away the house behind them, but he was so tired, he couldn't breathe enough to say look out!'

Holding Joe to his chest with one arm, Papa flipped the blanket and sheets aside. Slid Joe onto the mattress, smoothed the sheets over Joe's body up to his chin. A long kiss on the forehead and one between the eyes and then Papa left him, shivering, under heavy bedding. Sounds of smashing glass in the hallway. Mama shrieking, heavy hair sticking to her face and her mouth wet, angry, liquor smell on the wall where she'd thrown her glass.

"--too young, Giuseppe! He's a baby! A baby! No guns!"

Papa coming home from work, his gray jacket folded over his red and white striped sleeve. Papa's long slender fingers sliding his gold lighter, once Granpapa's lighter, out of his breast pocket. Papa saying, "See this? You can throw anything, hit anything, anyway you

want, any time at all."

Papa's arm along the back of his as they skipped stones across the water. And one day the lighter, Joe skipped it clear across, seven times two it sparked off the surface and Papa graduated him to knives.

Mama had one hand over his mouth, and one over his hands on his stomach when he opened his eyes in the dark. He got out of bed and took the clothes she gave him, his legs trembling as he forced them into his pants. They were, mama muttered, going to see the sea. She took his hand and led him through the dark hall, through the tiny kitchen (all windows, like a greenhouse, the gleaming clean of the counters, cabinets and fixtures drowning in weakly starred night), out the door, down the deck and into the woods behind the house. Thyme. Dust. Ocean. Rust. She would not let go of his hand. He could not let go of hers. Her glossy nails dug sharp into his flesh and her rings were cold. He didn't mind. When he stuck his thumb in his mouth she was so busy feeling their way down the leaf strewn, rooty hill, that she didn't mind either.

They waited in the woods besides the cliff. Mama squatted and put her back to the biggest rock in the world, and then she pulled a gun out of the air and rested it on her thigh. She bit her lip, staring all around her, then looked up at Joe and smiled. Her teeth flashed white. She opened her arms to him. His body humming with tension, he sat on the ground between her legs. He backed up close. Smelled jasmine oil, vetiver, oil of roses, the stink of raw silk and fear. Hugging herself and him she made him look up at the sky. Smooth fingers stroked through his hair while she told him stories he already knew about constellations he'd already memorized. She was making fun of vain Cassiopeia when Papa came, getting up so quick that Joe's head smacked against stone, she beat Joe to his arms. Wrapped her hands in the collar of papa's jacket and moaned, "Giu-." For the first time in almost forever Joe saw Papa kiss Mama, and for the first time in longer than that, he saw Mama kiss him back.

Jun, cross-legged on the floor of Joe's cell, wreathed in intent and relaxation, breathed. Her clothes folded neatly on the floor beside her, a lit brazier on the tiny desk. Though no qi-gong master it was clear to her, now that she bothered to look, that Joe was hemorrhaging qi, life energy leaking out of him.

Sensing Joe's waking, Jun went to the alarm clock and turned it off before it could sound.

Through opaque eyes, Joe watched her. She took his hand in hers, manipulating pressure points. He resisted her, but was too tired to keep the energy from flowing out of her and into him. "Is your head bad, still?" she asked after a few moments.

"Better. Thanks." Then, "I smell incense."

She sat on the edge of his bunk, gently grasping his right hand by her thumb and crooked middle finger, leaned forward and poured herself into him as if she were water.

He was so thirsty, his reserves so depleted that the giving was endless, eternal. Pleasure on top of pleasure, hurt on top of hurt. She saw the truth of it in the way he latched onto her and her gift,

felt it through his sweat, tasted it on his skin. She knew him.

When Joe could make her stop, when he could make her release him, body, soul and mind, she finally came. Slumping without a sound, shaking in his grip, warmth and cold spreading from every part of her body, colors flooding her mind, a sweetness so sharp it made her ache with its loss. She'd never known it could be like this, that she could be so aware of a man inside and out. Never known that she could spend herself like this on anyone's behalf.

Truth caught up with her and she said, "You've been lying to me."

Joe spoke when he was dressed. The terminal pulled onto his lap as he sat cross-legged on the moist floor of his cell. "About?"

"You and Nambu don't have a plan." The keys of the pad stuck together as Joe typed, and light thrown up on his face by the liquid crystal display was unkind. Jun knew Joe's face. Knew his many frowns and scowl-eyed glances, but the liar in front of her made no sense to her tired eyes.

When Joe finally answered his voice was as unfamiliar as his expression. "All I want to do is go back to Sicily and nail the bastards who killed my mother and father. It's nothing he hadn't authorized me to do before. It's nothing he'd allow anyone else to do.

"Do you remember what you said to me when we first met? You were standing with Jinpei hiding behind you and you asked me if Nambu was my father. I said my parents were dead. And you said, 'then who loves you, then?' and when I didn't answer, you took my hand and you said, would you like me to?'"

Jun remembered, the boy with the small, angry eyes and the jealous mouth.

"I wouldn't lie to you," he said. "Not with everything you've done for me."

The intercom came on, instructing the science ninja team to return to the God Phoenix. Joe slapped the terminal shut with a curse.

4. Three

3.

They were crushed. Having stumbled out of Joe's cell and into the God Phoenix after too little sleep. Now, they lay stretched out on the flight couches in the rear of the cabin where the high-pitched whine of the engines was most soothing.

Jun lay on her back, her nose curved towards the ceiling, her cape draping her legs. Her hand hung long and white from her sleep-limp wrist, scant centimeters from his own. Her fingertips rose-tipped, he imagined, from her warm blood's flow, were a marvel. In the chill darkness, she looked no different from the girl he'd fought beside and for over the last two years. Yet there was something about the minute brush of her lashes on her cheek, the dark swirl of her baby

hair at the shallow dip of her temple, and the soft part of her lips drew his hand to her face.

"Jun," he whispered.

Her eyes darted beneath her closed eyelids.

Joe slid off the couch and made way to the fore-cabin. Jinpei sat in his usual place, engrossed in a hand-held. Joe slung himself over Jinpei's chair, getting a good look at the graphics.

"Onechan awake yet?" Jinpei asked without looking up from the 4-color screen.

"Nope. Sleepin' like a baby."

"Unh," Jinpei grunted, his eyes on his game. "Whatcha do last night?"

"Talked."

"About you falling out of formation the other day?" Jinpei queried.

Joe resisted the urge to thump Jinpei on top of the head. "Yeah."

Jinpei, nodded, sucked on a tooth and fired at pencil shaped bogies with what looked like flower bombs. "What else you do?"

"Race."

"You win?"

"Not really."

Thumbs pressing repeatedly into the control-pad Jinpei laughed aloud, "The great Asakura wiped out by a girl --- Again!"

Grinning, Joe scratched his side. "What can I say, shrimp. If it's not one way, it's another."

Jinpei made a face.

Joe grunted, bopped the kid on the head then ruffled his hair. "Kid," he said, turning back to his seat, "if you only knew."

Jinpei's soft voice traveled back to him. "Aniki," said the lethal child known as the Great Swallow, "if you mess up Onechan it's going to be real bad between us."

Joe spun. Grabbed the back of Jinpei's seat, he yanked it around hard and snatching up the video game. "What did you say?!" he breathed into Jinpei's face.

"Nothing!"

"You wanna reconsider that, midget?"

Jinpei stared up at him, trying not to look either pissed or insubordinate. Joe released him, and went to speak to Ken and Ryu.

The rest of the flight passed in a blur: the debriefing at the new headquarters moreso. Joe overheard Jinpei tell Jun that he was going off with Ryu to visit Ryu's family, and vowed inwardly to leave the little shit's sister alone. She hadn't looked at him once since stepping off the God Phoenix.

Joe found himself at Jun and Jinpei's anyway, apologizing but not, addressing naked bare feet and legs and the ghostly whiteness of a neck glimpsed through a familiar gauzing of dark hair.

Voice in his throat, jaw locked like only in his worst nightmares, he was speaking, "In a world that made sense I would never have met you. Galactor assassins murdered Giorgio Asakura and his parents. Ten years after the fact, by some blessing, the chance to avenge them finally comes. I have to take it." Standing on the second floor landing of the tiny apartment, staring at the girl, holding onto the banister for support, waiting for her to say anything, even 'stay'. When she didn't rip off her face with a shriek to reveal sheets of blond hair, and jeering lips, when she stepped forward and cleared the dark with her face, Joe rushed her.

He moved with perfect haste, his arms wrapping strong around her middle, his hands settling high on her ribs. His lips found hers.

Despite their tight embrace, he could not get close enough. That she did not cry out made him seize her tighter. Legs tangling, they crossed her bedroom's threshold. She tripped him, or her leg did, and they went tumbling onto her bed in a long controlled fall and it was her turn to move with perfect haste because he was trembling, his hands useless, he shook so. She made silent promises, Jun did, and between them peeled him out of his clothes. He laughed because he was so stupid, he couldn't stop shaking and he was sorry, and she laughed because he wouldn't shut up. The shaking was a good thing, the best thing. Jun was near him. She was real. This was real. No matter where he put them, no matter how he held her, his hands shook. But in the wake of a reverent kiss they found clarity. Her hand was touching him. He bit his lip, going up in flames for real, and her lips were at his throat, at his mouth, at his cheek, and her hair obliterated the darkness and she was his angel of fire, incandescent, so bright she hurt his eyes, hurt his brain. He shut his eyes, seeing red through the closed lids, seeing Jun, afterimage bright, in his mind. Dark pain bloomed in his left eye. He winced. His eye hurt. Oh, God it hurt. His left eye caught fire. Fire boiled the tissue in his socket and he banged his head against the wall to get away, banged his head against the wall, his heels digging into the sheet a steady tattoo of stopthepainstopthepainstopthepain. His arms clenched around Jun convulsively. He felt the snap of her ribs, heard the shrill of her scream. He screamed through the froth in his mouth, through the blood, through the bile, through the pain. The shaking was a bad thing, a bad thing and it hurts ohgod it hurts, ohgod it hurts. There was a thin drilling noise, him screaming, and everything went dark.

Joe came to with his head between Jun's legs, her breasts within mouth reach. Jinpei was sitting on his legs. Ken squashed between him and his flight couch to his left.

From the sound of the engines the ship was decelerating and everyone Joe could see looked concerned.

Joe tried to speak, only to encounter a nasty tasting towel. His mouth felt like he'd cracked a molar and his tongue thick and numb, like he'd bitten it. And his face hurt. Specifically his eye hurt. A whole fucking lot.

He looked to Jun, whose face was oddly skewed. She kept her face very still. Her eyes were obscured by the yellow visor of her helmet but when he thought they met his, she smiled. Joe didn't smile back. Her fingers stopped stroking through his hair and Joe wondered how long had she been doing that.

"You had a seizure," Jun said, as her thumbs, soothing against his clammy skin, rubbed at the bunched muscles of his jaw. "Ease up on the bite-stick."

Joe did so, with difficulty. Ken pulled it free and it trailed a long line of red-threaded saliva.

"Can I have my hand back?" Joe croaked.

Dropping it, Ken sat back on his heels. Joe reached up to the source of the pain and encountered a bandage.

"You tried to gouge your eye out," Ken supplied, his blue eyes bleak.

"Can you move your legs?" Jun asked, her lips barely moving, and Joe wondered how much she really knew.

He tried to pull his legs towards him. For one horrible moment, they didn't respond before he realized that Jinpei's weight had numbed his legs. Joe shifted his leg, jostling the younger boy.

"Aniki," said the boy.

Joe would not look at Jinpei.

"Aniki," pleaded the kid. Joe ran his hands over his arms and chest, checking for further injury. "Joe?"

Jun leaned forward, and for what seemed like the first time Joe got a completely unobstructed view of the tender skin between her neck and her chin. Joe felt her hands tighten on his skull. Heard the kid swallow so hard he sympathetically felt the lump.

"I'll go help Ryu," Jinpei said.

Jun's hand slid down Joe's neck, kneading his flesh. The muscles and tendons were so tight the considerable strength she used made no difference.

"Jun," Ken said.

Her hands stopped what they were doing.

"Keep Jinpei and Ryu out of trouble."

She went.

Kneeling on one flexed leg, Ken fixed Joe with a glare. "You wanna tell me why you fell out of formation yesterday?"

"Lookin' up Jun's skirt?"

Ken's knuckles whitened on his knee, muscles tensing in his back and shoulders. His eyes shimmered with fury.

"I. Don't. Know." Joe bit out. Sat up without making any noise.

"You're going in for a full diagnostic," Ken said through his teeth. "Right after the debriefing."

"I've already had a full diagnostic."

"Oh, yeah?"

"Two!"

"When?"

"Recently," Joe gave his neck an experimental crack. He flexed his legs, got to his feet. His balance was fine. More than fine.

Sitting on the ground, Ken mildly inquired, "Why wasn't I informed?"

"Results are pending." Which wasn't a total lie. The God Phoenix passed through a pocket of turbulence; Joe barely swayed on his feet. He smirked at Ken.

Something odd gleamed in Ken's eyes. Joe realized there hadn't been any turbulence.

"You're going back to the clinic."

"Not after the debriefing."

"Right after the debriefing."

"My time is my own."

Ken stood, hand curled into a fist. "I'll put you down myself, Joe."

Joe grunted at the unfortunate choice of words. "Fuck it," he said. "Fine," and settled himself on his couch.

"Good," Ken said, and looked at his relaxing fist as if surprised. For a moment Ken looked a little sheepish. He stowed the bite stick in a biohazard compartment.

"Fuck you," Joe said.

"Joe," whispered, but everyone in the cabin could hear him. "You haven't been a hundred percent in a while."

"After seventeen months combat, none of us are."

"That's enough!" Ken's pretty face was hard, his hand fisted at his heart level. "You are out of line, G2!"

"We're cleared to land, Commander," said Ryu.

Ken took a deep breath, "If you don't watch . . . I'll walk you over myself."

Not if I'm mobile, Joe thought, securing himself for landing.

5. Four

4.

Joe skipped the debriefing.

His teammates surrounded him in a staggered diamond formation as they descended God Phoenix's ramp. Jun leading, Ryu bringing up the rear, wing capes swaying in unison over legs walking in unison, breathing in unison. They were the Science Ninja Team Gatchaman, five acting as one, but when Jun and Jinpei turned to the right, Joe went left.

Ken grabbed his shoulder. "What are you doing?"

Jun and Jinpei were already twisting around, slick as chorus line girls, their wings sweeping out behind them. Jun had her mouth to her wristband, ready to speak. As did Jinpei. Jun bit her lip, lowered her hand to waist, thumb and forefinger touching at the tip, the rest of her fingers curled. Joe looked away first, then shrugged Ken off. Ryu caught Joe's arm in one huge hand before he went completely off balance.

"The infirmary," Joe said.

"Infirmary?" Ken echoed.

"He means the clinic, maybe," said Ryu.

"Following your orders, Commander," Joe said and patted Ryu's hand. Ryu let go. Joe walked towards the infirmary without a backward glance.

Joe was too far away to hear what Ken said into his wristband, but Joe knew that he was under at least two types of surveillance as he cleared the hangar.

In the infirmary he signed in. Told Lu (Xiao-Chen, not Kelly O'Shane-) that he needed to see Dr. Saavedra, or whoever was around, now. Out of perversity, he filled in the sheet for walk-in and wrote 'full diagnostic' in the reason space and 'worried commander' in the complaint. For a moment Joe couldn't see where to sign his name, his uncovered eye going milky cotton sight on him. He squinted, blinked and glimpsed a hail of broken masonry.

He'd been seeing things off and on since the night before last. Joe wondered how much that had to do with lack of sleep and his head

injuries.

Lu smiled at Joe when she took the clipboard and put it atop her desk. At the end of the day she would enter all that information into the clinic dataset and compare it with the day's encounter forms.

Joe went to the bathroom, pissed and shit into the appropriate containers. Placed the containers in the metal cabinet built into the wall. Returned to the waiting room. Joe sat facing Lu. Leaned his head against the wall, crossed his arms, and shut his eye. He must have fallen asleep because the ringing phone startled him awake. His eye slit open before he remembered that he was waiting to see a doctor. Lu wasn't at the desk. The phone rang again. The door behind the desk opened, revealing Lu. She grinned at Joe, removed her earring and picked up the phone with her neat square hand. Lu had very plain hands, but she loved red polish. Cardinal red, to match her lips and the streaks in her light hair. He'd painted her toenails once, on their first of three dates.

Yes, Dr. Nambu, Joe lip-read. Yes, Dr. Nambu, he's right here. Would you like to speak to him? No? Any messages? No? Have a nice day, Dr. Nambu.

Joe went in and spoke to Dr. Ruriko Saavedra, just pleasantries. They'd dated a little bit when she was an ISO sponsored resident and he was still training. He asked her out (again). Saavedra declined. He spent five minutes being funny and charming enough that she laughed herself silent.

Lifting her clipboard in her hands, Dr. Saavedra gave Joe a meaningful look. He removed his helmet. She was in his space so fast his hands were up, warding her away. Saavedra pushed his head up, and tsked.

Rolling his uncovered eye, Joe complained about savage headaches and nightmares and falling off of the flight couch while not wearing his helmet. The good doctor's chin dimpled. Joe couldn't remember if she did that when she concentrated or when she was angry. She examined it with her little ophthalmoscope. The intense light caused him no discomfort.

"You're lucky you didn't scratch your cornea. Your gloves are filthy, the skin around your eye is severely abraded, and you're concussed."

"How bad?"

"No worse than usual. I have to cleanse the skin you irritated. Your eye's going to water a little from the fumes. Don't blink."

It burned like hell, and his eye started itching like crazy. Saavedra slapped a cool patch on it. It felt good.

Joe peeled out of the top of his suit, slooked off one sweaty sleeve cocked his arm at the elbow. She got out a couple of vacuum tubes found a decent vein, and drew blood. When she was finished, she made a face at him. And he snorted, picking up a cotton ball and slapping it to the puncture.

Dr. Saavedra, Ruri to him once, stepped away from him. "Go ahead and change," she said. "I'll be back in a minute." But was back in eleven. Sat down by the sink and asked what had prompted him to come in, pen ticking off all the symptoms and complaints to which he lied 'no'. Of course he said 'yes' to headaches and dizzy spells and let her think that they were stress-related. Which they were, and he did have a record of those.

Chuckling when she reached his scrawled 'worried commander' Saavedra looked at him seriously. "Your urine checks out. So does the stool. Soonest we could get results on anything besides your blood work would be tomorrow. Scans and X-rays, all that can wait until tomorrow."

"S' great." Joe tore off his robe.

"We'll start at five, which gives you time to rest."

Joe reached for his civvies. "Five tomorrow morning?"

"Yes. You'll sleep here. We'll start by monitoring your sleep patterns, today."

"Sleep patterns?"

"You had a seizure, Joe. You're going to have to stay in for observation."

"Can I at least get something to eat?"

"Of course. Tell me what you want and I'll send someone."

Joe put his hands behind him on the examining table and, leaned against the edge, he let his shoulders slump, put all his weariness in his voice. "Ruri, I wanna stretch my legs. You're gonna have me in here for the next two days, right?"

Ruriko Saavedra let him go.

He left the clinic, just one more ISO employee coming out of the medical offices.

Jinpei resumed surveillance.

Joe let the kid follow for a while. Got some coffee from the commissary and a pack of cigarettes. Camels unfiltered. He headed out for the loading bay, flashing his security clearance, sat on the landing, legs dangling over the edge. Broke two matches before managing to light the cigarette.

Joe only smoked half. Re-entered the building. Started walking, head down, hands in his pockets, until he reached a spot where it was only he and Jinpei in the corridors.

Joe turned a corner, stayed.

Jinpei came around at the same speed, and was prepared, aiming for Joe's solar plexus with a single bolo- ball, and following through with a foot to Joe's kidneys.

Joe pushed Jinpei through the motion, had him up against the wall before Jinpei knew it, upside down and screaming against Joe's hand. "I don't have time for this shit. And I'm sorry." Joe growled, and hugged the kid, hard. Then knocked him out. He lay Jinpei on the ground, arranging his short limbs so he wouldn't be stiff when he woke.

"You didn't have to do that."

Joe whirled, shuriken in his hand. Jun stood in her whites and pinks, the avenging Swan. "Give him to me."

Joe backed away.

"Give him to me!"

There was an ultra bright flash and Joe stood before her as the condor, feather shuriken in his hand.

"Why are you doing this?" Jun asked.

Joe made no move, no answer.

Kneeling next to Jinpei, checking him over, Jun spoke, "You never went for a single diagnostic, let alone two."

"The first time they checked me out they said it was all in my head."

Jun was cradling her adopted brother, pressing her cheek against his little face. "You didn't have to hurt him."

"It's only a nerve pinch. I didn't want to."

Her expression turned ugly. She hugged the kid tighter. "Just go."

"If I go in for observation, I'm never coming out. I can't die in a hospital."

"You didn't even try, Joe."

"Go to my trailer--"

"I hacked your records."

"--under the sink, on a hook, is a safety deposit box key. First Integrated Island Bank. It's all there. I'm not dying in a hospital. And I'm not going out without taking a piece of Galactor with me."

"You didn't even try!"

"My parents--"

She screamed. Joe had put Jinpei so far under that the kid didn't even twitch.

"They have to be avenged! I have to be avenged!"

Jun lurched to her feet, struggling with Jinpei's dead weight, "Go, already! I fixed it so the alarm won't sound for eight minutes after you leave! Get out of my face. Do what you have to do-- Go die!"

Reeling, turning on his heel, Joe fled.

6. Five

5.

In Nambu's offices Jun worked fast, kneeling on the floor in front of his desk. Her tapered fingers, stained and scarred, their short nails buffed to a high shine, tapping command codes into the terminal via the alpha numeric spider designed to bypass the touch identification function of the keypad while the other hand, writing so fast it was cramping, took notes.

Nambu gave Jun free run of his offices, the picture in the lowest left hand drawer of his desk the reason why. The frame was oval, badly spot-welded metal, not quite hiding the ragged edges of the photo. The child was filthy, three but looking eighteen months because of malnutrition. She'd been tied to a rusted out highchair, waste running down her legs and pooling on the ground. She had enormous eyes and her smile, despite the squalor, was sweet.

Jun knew the story behind the picture well, having overheard it enough times when Nambu was assuring an associate of her loyalty and discretion.

The picture had been torn out of a group shot of girl children left to die in a state run orphanage.

She'd been his cappuccino-a-day baby. A little girl he'd sponsored after seeing an advert that featured hundreds of abandoned children who could be clothed and fed for the price of a cup of coffee each day.

Not many people traveled far from home in that part of the world in those days. Gangs, unexploded mines, sky-rocketing fuel costs and dead roads and bridges that were not going to be rebuilt by any two-year plan made travel untenable for most. Only armed forces engineers, relief workers, and non-governmental organization visionaries like Kozaburo Nambu, went on impromptu road trips.

Nambu had been hard at work on a damn in the lower Jupiter valley when he realized that he wasn't more than a hundred clicks away from the Small World facility where his little girl lived.

Nambu was unexpected, and he wandered the grounds before stumbling on the room where girls had been left to die. The smell had hit him first, and the silence. Little children shouldn't have ever been so quiet. Nambu told people it was fate that he found her when he did. That he'd fallen in love with the purity of her smile. That even if she hadn't been the girl in the photograph back in his home in Utoland, he'd have still rigged a baby-sack out of his shirt and put her in it.

Via satellite uplink, Nambu called in many favors and shut that

orphanage down. The scandal was in the papers and on the net for weeks, and in the end, Jun was a ward of Kozaburo Nambu, and Nambu was a key investor in a new children's relief organization with offices and facilities all over southeast Asia and Utoland.

Jun, no last name, none was recorded and Nambu never gave her one, was an arrow in his quiver, a living weapon forged to act on his command. Her education, her skills, her experience were a reflection of his values and needs. Jun did not begrudge him this. She had only to look at that picture in his desk and imagine her life without him. But in the course of 36 hours Jun had discovered that she could deny Joe nothing. Even if, especially if, he did not ask. And so, hastily, heart in her throat, stomach churning with what she knew to be betrayal, she excised all digital evidence of Joe's flight from headquarters.

7. Six

6.

In the envelope on the front passenger seat of the G2 were five blank credit cards. Taped to the back of each was scrawled a pin number and on a separate piece of paper was a name: Sara Holliday, MD.

Joe smiled, a simple, tiny twist of his lips.

Headaches, light sensitivity, vertigo, and the occasional blackout, those were Joe's first indications that his health was going to shit.

Headaches, he could excuse by skipping meals. Light sensitivity could be attributed to increasingly long nights. Vertigo lost cause for alarm when he'd been drinking hard and was chatting up some girl under dubious lighting; and it helped that during the course of the war every one of Joe's teammates had begun to manifest signs of prolonged stress and strain. Joe wasn't the only science ninja who avoided all but the most cursory physical examinations, his mistrust of ISO medical care profound since the time Nambu had strapped him into a centrifuge for the purpose of dislodging shrapnel from Joe's brain.

Shrapnel from his brain.

Afterwards, Joe had filched Nambu's notes, seen that Nambu had scrawled in his horrible, over-educated handwriting, "Permeability Stability Experiment #22" and decided that the next person he let touch him in a medical way would be more than just some guy with a Ph.D.

Joe may have gone from mission to mission without stopping until his heart failed if it hadn't been for the blackouts. Those were much harder to ignore. Tapping his steering wheel with his hand he spoke, "I did go to the ISO meds one more time after Nambu and the stupid centrifuge thing. You know what they told me? They told me I had migraines. Everyone told me I had migraines."

He reached under the bandage that covered his eye, and ripped it off.

"So I took my ass to doctors."

To a second floor walk-up in Utoland's Chinatown that Mr. Kim across the street from the Snack J swore by. Dr. Gao took Joe's money, checked his tongue, his eyes, his sputum and told Joe that he had too much anger in him and needed to see a therapist. The second took his money, made him shit in a pot, stuck him full of needles and asked if he'd been in any car accidents lately. The third had a practice off an alley off an unnamed street in the one of the worst quadrants of Utoland City. The brick walls, once red, had faded to the color of thinnest sliced rare roast beef and the ground surrounding it was covered by hundreds of abandoned sneakers. Dingy whites and grays and palest browns, wrinkled cotton, plastic, and leather, tumbled atop one another, compressed by age, compacted like a surreal stretch of well traveled beach. Faded fliers continued the washed-out motif up the leaning walls, stippled the bloody pink brick weak gray and weaker yellow. The sky, high above, was a narrow splice of white.

He'd breathed easily, and not stumbling over the graveyard of tennis shoes at all, made his way to the doctor's front door. Knocked. Was let into a dark, very clean, very cold, and very empty sitting room by a short woman in a doctor's coat. Flashed his roll of soiled cash and demanded a catscan.

Joe hadn't recognized dark little Doc Holliday. He didn't think she had recognized him. He undressed in front of her, wincing at the band of pale flesh where his wristcom should have been, and allowed himself to be tested by a woman who once was ISO, but had left for a shadier, more lucrative way of life. He stripped, stepped up, looked to the side and coughed. He held out his arms for needles, and bent his head for a band of semi-insulated conducting material. She listened to him recite a list of his symptoms with a dry expression, and gave him a series of pills: Dilatin for the seizures, Osoparine for the migraines and little pink pills that tasted a lot like baby powder and hit like really good bourbon. Those gave him back his reflexes and his coordination. After taking that, he saw clearer than he had in days. When Joe asked Dr. Holliday what they were, she ignored him.

Wiping at his weeping eye Joe frowned. "I didn't go back for my results until I fell down during a mission."

He sat through debriefing, didn't say a word, and after that went out and got very very sober. Went on an all night walk-about that took him everywhere. Went to the race track. Considered how badly he wanted to win the upcoming race and instead visited his parents' grave. He could have stuck a stick in a wasp nest and shook it around with less consequence.

"When I went back to Sicily. I found out my parents were Galactor. You think straight under those circumstances. But I did go back to Dr. Holliday."

It took him two months to run out of the little pink pills with the nasty sick sweet taste that sharpened him better than pharmaceutical grade cocaine.

Holliday insisted on another examination.

"This was the first angiopathy you've had done?" Dr. Holliday had asked.

He'd nodded.

"I'm not surprised, considering..." she'd begun, taking in his appearance carefully, then shook her head.

She was former ISO, after all, Joe surmised. She knew what it was like. Had Joe not been so worried he would have noticed the darkness of her poreless skin, her mouth, her nose, how everything was the same even tone as the curve of her inner nostril. Sometimes when she spoke her lips curved to reveal small even teeth, charmingly gapped in the middle in which her tongue, violet rose, bloomed like something chaste and at other times obscene. He only saw these things when he replayed the encounters in his mind and engraved them in his memory.

"This might kill you," she'd said. "Your injuries."

"I have money."

The doctor shook her head.

"Lots of money. Insurance, too."

"It's operable, but the procedure might result in some impairment of your fine motor skills. I'm sorry, Mr. Asakura,"

Joe'd thought about killing her, knowing his cover blown. Realizing that he was much worse off if he was thinking about killing her, and her not already dead.

"The procedure could cripple you."

Joe'd looked at his wrist, at the pale band where his wristcom should be.

"My daughter is a fan."

Joe had understood. Chuckling a little because in those moments he'd forgotten he was a race car driver. "One of the few."

The doctor's smile had been understanding. "Your face is all over her room. You might not race again."

"Worst case?"

"Physical therapy. You might have to relearn how to walk."

He'd done that before.

Foot on the peddle, gritting his teeth, Joe heard Jun's voice in real-time: "So you can't race cars anymore, at least you'll be alive!"

"A cripple?" Joe yelled back. "Blind?" And wiped at the itchy moisture leaking out of his weak eye.

He was talking to himself.

Not good.

Joe's molars clicked together and his mouth closed into a frown.

It wasn't for nothing that he was entertaining imaginary Juns trying to talk him out of he was about to do. It wasn't for nothing he hadn't pitched his wristcom out the window while going over the causeway and let the wind carry it out into the bay. But he'd strong-armed too many goons and undercover ISO agents in goon's-clothing, broken into too many classified files, and shaken-down too many corrupt officers of the law till he knew more places of Galactor business and interest in Utoland City than maybe Berg Katse, glam-rock leader of the organization, his-or-her-freak-ass self to go back to Crescent Coral and let the ISO quacks take a crack at fixing what was wrong with him.

Not that it'd make a difference.

Joe reached into his pocket, dug out a flat pillcase, flicked it open with his thumb. There were eight pills there. Pink. Precious. He choked two down. Dry swallowed them. The pressure behind his eyes began to lessen and the colors of the world shifted back towards normal.

Hearing the far-off wail of sirens Joe hitched forward and peered into the rear-view mirror. Trucks and cars sped along behind him but no patrol cars, no motorbikes. He tilted the rearview mirror and hunched down, squinting. There were no planes in the sky.

A tinkling staticky noise sounded. Joe flipped the catch on the glove compartment. The sound became louder.

Joe fished out his wristcom. Turned it over, again. It emitted the thin sound he was used to: the bird scramble.

"Le' me alone, Jun." he said.

The wristcom grew warm in his palm, its bright primary colors beginning to glow. An electric tingle ran through his skin, quicksilver, like Jun's first kiss before searing his palm.

"SHIT!" Joe shouted, flinging the wristcom to the mat and flattening his tongue against his hand.

Joe snorted, slammed his foot harder on the gas.

If Nambu hadn't caught up to him by the end of the afternoon the ISO wouldn't have anyone to blame but itself.

The tires of the car rolled over a coffee can as Joe pulled into the driveway of the gas station/carwash.

Joe popped the trunk, leaned back as he opened it so the hot air rising out of it didn't add to his haze. Joe had to rub his temples anyway. Slammed the trunk shut. Slung the bag over his shoulder and started to walk. The band around Joe's head, the invisible one that had been there since Jun had screamed at him, loosened a little. He looked around, really looked around. He'd never been there during the day.

Daytime, Hana Drive was ghetto. Nine out of ten storefronts were boarded up windows, if they had them, painted over, papered or soaped. It was discount auto part stores and pawn shops. Empty was the word. Quiet, and a little too clean.

Nighttime, it was valet parking only up and down both sides of the road. Taxis and limos depositing already lit partiers on the sidewalks in front of the clubs, public and private. The painted buildings didn't look shabby by the light of the neons and the spotlights pointed up at the semi-tropical sky, not at the well-painted, badly-built buildings. Inside sheet-rock and concrete block buildings and warehouses that had gone from mid-range office space to low rent public housing, to squats then crack- houses and back again, people partied, and Galactor had its way.

Commercial Hana drive was only one of several places in Utoland City where Galactor had its way.

There was a rock, sitting on the sidewalk and minding its own business. Joe kicked it forward and strolled after it, towards P Infinity.

Seven levels of dance floor on half a city-block.

It wasn't that every other girl that picked him up at P Infinity turned out to be a Galactor spy or Devilstar assassin trying to find out if his having the same build as Condor Joe made him Condor Joe that brought the place under his suspicion; it was how damn busy the loading dock was, all fucking night long, and how P Infinity never served food.

Joe heard truck backfires, running engines, the sounds of people moving heavy things into a warehouse.

The big guy out back in the black shirt and pants was sweating and angry looking. He saw Joe coming from a ways away. Joe sauntering; step-step-step, kick. Step-step-step, kick. The rock never going too far to his left or to his right. The bouncer narrowed his eyes, "No soliciting."

Joe smiled at him, rubbed his hand over his mouth. "Nothin's for sale," he whispered.

"What?" said the bouncer.

The rock shattered to the right of his head and he covered his face with his hand, crying out in surprise, failing to block the feather shuriken that took him through the left eye.

It was the last clean kill of Joe's day.

8. Seven

7.

Temporary HQ's off-tempo red alert rang a little louder than it should have on the fourth count. Her fault. The changes she'd made so Joe could get out were having effects she hadn't anticipated. The

changes were distracting her from her assigned task. That and Ken's stare. He leaned against the railing of the first tier of the command center, arms bent back, his hands hooked over the top rail. Over his shoulder she could just see the viewscreen playing images of destruction.

Joe had been busy.

She typed a series of commands. Her wristcom vibrated in sympathy, numbing her arm from wrist to elbow. Ken's fingers signed, the blamp-blamp- blamp-blamp of the alarms making all but shouted communication impossible in the command center, again.

With the first images of the remains of the Circle X discount CD/DVD warehouse and the largest nightclub on Hana Drive the command center had gone quiet except for the rapid tap of fingers on keypads, and Nambu's voice issuing commands. The first cheers had died down when people realized that the places AWOL Condor Joe, G2, had flattened were Galactor operations that no one in the command center, except Nambu, had known about - and all of them deep in Utoland City, territory thought inviolate by the ISO.

And only Nambu had known about them.

The messengers and couriers had been coming fast and swift through the double doors, trailing behind Nambu's flapping white coattails as he dashed from station to station with uncanny aplomb.

If it hadn't been for the gray circles of sweat beneath his arms, the cloth wet enough for her to make out the patterns of his madras shirt, Jun would have thought that the scorched sky over Hana Drive as shown by the view screen, greasy smoke sporing over shattered walls and pilons of the three story converted warehouse that only hours earlier had been P Infinity, its loading dock littered with bodies, fused asphalt and glass, and flames spiking over dark rainbow oil slicks were something Nambu expected.

Nambu being a great one for secret plans.

Joe had been busy since he'd gone AWOL, and she'd thought him on the way to BC Island, Sicily where his parents had been assassinated. She'd panicked when Nambu hailed her via the wristcom, demanding that she present herself to the command center and track down Joe's whereabouts, locking her jaw against the urge to wail out loud so hard that minutes later, her jaw was still clicking.

They'd found Joe's car soon after and Ryu had gone to pick it up and take back any Galactor survivors for questioning, not that Jun expected there to be any.

Joe was nothing if not thorough.

Part of Jun admired Joe's efficiency. She may not have been able to do a better job of bringing down that club herself; but when Nambu had begun rattling off locations where Joe might turn up, and each of those turned out to be Galactor franchises, part of her was appalled that Joe had managed to discover that she, with all her training and access to Nambu's files, had not.

Jun had never seen Nambu move, nor heard him talk, so fast.

Ken was still staring at her. The image on the screen changed, showing the record shop where it was assumed that Joe had begun his rampage. The windows were cracked, starred really, and body matter opaqued the glass.

"Report!" Nambu snapped. Then muttered, "There's no telling what Galactor will do in retaliation."

Jun shivered. Tried another command.

Joe was probably dead, if not completely crazy.

The tech at Nambu's elbow swallowed audibly. Ken ran down the stairs and snatched the printout from the frozen tech's hands.

"No survivors." Ken answered. "Twenty dead."

"Civilian fatalities?"

"None."

"Oh, thank the Lord."

Ken grabbed the tech by the arm, shoved the printout into his hand. Said something to him that was lost in the upswell of noise.

Nambu tore his eyes from the carnage on the screen and pinned Jun with his gaze.

She shook her head 'No'. Typed commands faster.

Ken ran up the stairs, put a hand on the back of her chair and another on her desk. "Report?" he murmured.

"He's not responding."

"If he's still there," Ken's chin jerked towards the screen. Grainy images of the parking lot behind the CD/DVD warehouse ripe with dying flame (and bodies, more bodies) more bodies than should have fit into the 120 sq. foot shop. Subterranean levels then, and a two fifths of them dressed in Galactor infantry green.

"Concentrate on the task. You're thinking too much," Ken said.

"Some of those people are probably ours." Jun said. "Undercover for the ISO. That's probably how Joe--"

"Keep it together," snapped Ken.

Jun bit her lip.

"Do you have a signal yet for me?" demanded Nambu.

"No," she whispered.

"Hakase," a tech shrilled, "Director Kane is requesting your presence in conference room B."

Nambu pushed the tech out of his way, stalked to Jun's station.

"Jun?" he snapped grabbing the railing beneath her station and glaring up at her. "I need that information."

"Give her time, Hakase," Ken said. "She's working as fast as she can." He put a hand on Jun's shoulder, his fingers tight.

Jun swallowed.

Another courier approached Nambu. This one looked shocky.

"What is it?" from Nambu.

"We're getting more reports from Pier Infinity. Indications of nerve toxin use."

Nambu's face, stoic at the best of the times, went even calmer, but again, it was his voice that gave him away. Water was never as airless unless at the very bottom of the ocean. "This city may never recover from what the Condor's set in motion."

"Hakase?" asked Ken.

"Continue your search from the God Phoenix. You've accomplished nothing here."

They watched Nambu exit the door, be accosted by aides and military men before the door swung shut behind him. More images on the screen from Pier 23, where a massage parlor, against all zoning laws of Utoland City, had once stood.

"How did he?" Jun murmured, her eyes screwed open. "How did he?"

Ken's hand was on the back of her neck. "Relax," he instructed. "Focus."

"How di-- how did...?"

"How did Joe find out what Galactor was up to right in our backyard?" Ken asked.

Jun nodded, sucking her lower lip into her mouth.

"Anyone should know, it would be you."

"I would never--"

"Why can't you find him?"

"I'm trying. I've been trying. The wristcoms aren't designed-- He--" Ken softened his voice. "We will find him. We will bring him back and we will put him in the hospital and he will get better."

Jun was shaking her head, tears standing in her eyes even as she tried another set of commands. Both their wristcoms began to vibrate.

"We'll try again from the God Phoenix. We will find him."

"No we won't. No we won't. He's gone out there to die."

"Shut up! Don't say that! He wouldn't do that!"

"Like he wouldn't hurt Jinpei?"

Grabbing her by the arm, Ken pulled her out of her seat. "Get up. And quit crying. Might as well kill him yourself."

Ken's hand was so strong, wrapped around her wrist. Her trying to shake it loose only made him strengthen his hold as they ran down the corridor to the God Phoenix's bay.

9. Eight

8.

Bleeding from wounds he hadn't noticed, Joe walked through drifts of yellow green gas, thick in color like spoiled urine, seeping out of the vents and trickling down the deep gray walls of the subterranean motor pool to cling to the cast-metal floor.

Joe's joints popped as he ghosted from pillar to pillar, and he held his hand to the mask's nose guard, needlessly. The sensation of his skull expanding and contracting in short arcs was an illusion, compounded by the flapping of the loose end of the plastic strap beside his ear. The pills he'd taken hours earlier were wearing off, his reflexes slowing down. The popping of his joints, the transcendent ache in his lower back, the irritation of his skin exacerbated by the toxins he'd dumped into the vents and the dust and chemicals raised by the explosives he'd detonated.

Not his tools of choice. Give him his hands, his feet, his other hands, the shuriken and the gun, and when the prey was the right sort, his knife.

Reaching the stairwell Joe turned to the surveillance camera he knew was concealed behind the bulletproof green globe, took a deep breath and took off the mask. Let Galactor see him. Let Berg Katse know for sure that the man who'd taken down P Infinity and the record store was Condor Joe. Let Katse see his real face. Let him recognize the wristcom, cleaner than it ever was in combat, and note the feather shuriken stuck in Galactor grunts.

Joe pulled the borrowed mask over his head coughed as filtered air came back into his lungs. It tasted wrong and his shoulders felt light. He missed the flap of his cape behind him; the familiar weight of all those shurikens caught up in the material; the cinch of his utility belt around his waist.

It was too quiet. His feet were sticking to the ground from the fire burning in the lower levels, not from spilled blood. Joe preferred his violence up close and personal. Blood was cleaner. So much cleaner than walking into an enemy facility and picking off grunt after grunt after blasting apart most and poisoning all.

The fire didn't satisfy, though. And he knew that lots of blood didn't satisfy either, but when given a choice Joe'd rather a knife. Or the other four members of his team at his back and his cable gun gripped in his hand.

He stepped over a fallen body. It squirmed. A hand, a mechanic's, grotty with grease and brightened by blood, reached out for him, its owner coughing up all kinds of its insides. The gas had done it. The gas had incapacitated every person unlucky enough to inhale its fumes, and for those who worked in the garage, with its already toxic air, the effects had been illuminating.

They saw his sneakers, his jeans, assumed the worst.

"Help me," Joe heard the terrorist crawling towards him say.

Joe broke his neck.

Oh, for his gun; or Ken's birdrang; or more enemy casualties. Not this weird silence in the motorpool and the stranger one in his heart.

Blood was honest. It was personal. Only came when he looked into his enemies' faces when they died. The stickiness of it beneath his feet, the rapidly spoiling bad fish sauce stink of it, better than the choking coughing cries of the fallen as he walked over them, them reaching out for help, to him, the one who made them die.

A goon blocked the way to the stairwell, cheek ground into the floor. Joe stepped over it. Weak fingers closed around his ankle. With his toe, Joe pushed her hand away. The skin around her eye was caked with blood, and twitching. He pulled a knife from his belt and fell to his knees beside her, pushed the knife in and twisted. Her body tensed beneath him. "Condor Joe," Joe whispered into her ear so she would know. Blood pop surprise from her chapped lips and an answering tightness in his already seizing chest. He pulled on his knife. It stayed stuck. He put his knee to the corpse's back and yanked. The metal caught on bone. He twisted the knife the direction opposite to the one he'd put it in at, braced his knee over her waist, pulled. The knife jerked free. Joe held it up in his hand, let it drop to the ground with a clatter. He wouldn't be needing it. Bowing his back, Joe placed his palms on the ground and stood, blowing on his hands.

Joe made his way up the stairs and rather than watch the building burn and pick off any people that may have escaped from it, and stole a modified Integra from the employee parking lot.

His hands shook a little against the steering wheel, so he fixed his gaze above the dashboard. He could hear sirens as he crossed the causeway into Utoland City. Passed a white aluminum-sided building with hunter green shutters on the windows on the right. A church. Catholic, by the looks of it. The sign on the message board-- and Joe was relieved that at that moment he could see that far-- announced confession between 1-3 in the afternoons. Resting his head on his cheek, one hand on the steering wheel he passed the exit to the church's small parking lot and its palm lined driveway.

The God Phoenix completed another pass over Utoland City still with no sign of Joe.

Ken pressed his hand to his ear in disbelief.

"What is it, commander?" Jun asked from her station.

"They've found the G-2." He said feeding the coordinates. "Ryu, set a course for the race-track."

"What happens after we pick it up?" asked Jinpei. "We can't go back without Joe."

"Yes, Jinpei, those are exactly our orders." Ken's grin came out, sincere and wild, "But you better not run off cause you think you see Joe, because if Jun goes after you," more teeth, "Ryu and I will have to get the vehicle aboard our selves."

Jinpei started to laugh.

Looking west, Joe shaded his eyes. The sun was setting, dyeing the horizon glowing orange and white. Purple night spreading behind the jagged colors. Tie-dye and kodachrome, Joe thought, almost surprised by the poetic turn of his thoughts.

Bracing his arm and elbow against the wall, Joe pushed himself to his feet. Thumb snagging in the nylon, Joe pulled a stocking leg over his head, immediately compromising his vision, but it was okay. Only needed to go through a place once and it was in his nerves, for-frickin- ever. He could navigate it blind. Cable-gun in hand, memory and balance guiding him, Joe skimmed over the graveyard of shoes, missing a bad ankle turn by a fraction before he reached up and jumped for the fire-escape. Latching on and hanging loose long enough to draw the right bead and snag the roof top opposite white shadow to the top of Doc Holliday's building.

Inside it was cool and dark, different dark from outdoors without saying. Fingers feeling clumsy tore holes in the cool clinginess over his mouth and eyes. He saw better. Looked at his hand, letting his eyes adjust to the dark. Looked down at the moist scraps of panty-hose in his hand and murmured, "What am I doing?" and pushed himself off the wall.

Joe was standing behind the door to the Dr. Holliday's office, his file in his hand when Dr. Holliday poked her head in. He stunned her with one blow. Tied her hands with her bathrobe belt. Picked her up and put her over his shoulder. She was round and light, but his knees buckled and he knocked the wall with her head.

He'd tied her to her comfy doctor chair and slapped her twice before she regained consciousness.

"You remember me?" Joe asked, his hand spread on the chart in front of her. The doctor had her face turned to the side, her eye rolling a little. She looked panicky, like she was gonna puke.

Joe pulled the charts out of her way. "Do you remember me?" he asked again.

Dr. Holliday shook her head. He moved his hand from the chart with a curse. Flipped it around so she could read the alias he'd put down as his name.

She nodded.

He cocked his gun. Reached for the gag knot at the back of her

head.

"Quiet." Joe instructed and untied her. She pulled the gag away from her mouth. Stared up at him, her gaze penetrating. She bent to the chart.

Read.

"You're the race car driver. We should have operated on you months ago."

Joe held up his wrist, the one with his wristcom.

Round little Doc Holliday sat up straighter. Her curvy little chin didn't tremble a bit but he did see that she swallowed really fast.

"You worked for the ISO-"

"I already told you people, I don't know who the kagaku ninja tai are. I've never saw the science ninja's up close."

Joe spoke the command, but bitter mucous erupted up his throat and coated the back of his mouth. "Transmute," Joe hissed.

The change sounded like a windtunnel on fire for a moment. His eyes rolled up into the back of his head. He slapped his palms on Dr. Day's desk. Locked his arms, his finger clenching on the trigger of the gun.

Dr. Holliday threw herself out of her chair, falling with a clatter. Making a sharp noise as she landed on her shoulder and hands.

Joe groaned, his legs flowing like water beneath him.

"Untie me!" Dr. Holliday commanded from the ground, trying to kick herself upright.

Costumed in his colors, Joe's hands slipped off the desk. His helmet cushioned his head as it clipped the edge of the desk, but Joe was unconscious before he reached the floor.

10. Nine

9.

"Joji," Jun's voice, ridiculously high and soft. "Baby, please. Joji, wake up, they're coming."

Small, ungloved hands on his face. His cheeks tingling, hot. Heavy muggy taste on his mouth. He was lying on the floor and the room was very cold.

"Joji, please, you don't have much time."

He whimpered, dropped his arm over his face, hitting the linoleum-covered floor.

"Joe," two light slaps on his face, "Joji, please, get up."

He opened his eyes. Jun knelt before him. She wore her street clothes; white jacket, #3 T-shirt and striped jeans. Her eyes were shining, her face flushed. He sat up a little, her hands on his shoulders steadied him.

"Juni," he reached for her face, "My head doesn't hurt?"

Nodding, Jun brushed her hair out of her face. He reached for a stray strand and caught sight of the bulky bandage on his arm.

"It's a shunt." Jun said. "Pain killers, euphorics, stimulants. It's supposed to help."

He pulled his legs under him, his legs light as he tried to stand. Getting on her knees Jun slung his arm over her shoulder and stood, just managing his length.

Pushing her hand against his side, Jun held him steady as they made their way out of the room and down the back stairs. His night sight was back. He'd not noticed it'd been impaired. He'd been worse off than he'd thought.

At the bottom of the stairs, they moved apart. Joe tried not to look as if he were propping his back against the wall. His fingers sought out her face. Traced her eyebrows, her cheeks, her chin.

"I've been hallucinating a lot," he said.

Nodding, Jun stroked his arm. "I'm here." She sighed. "I'm right here. We're at Dr. Holliday's."

"I followed Katse from here."

"You did."

"Holliday's a double-agent?"

Lifting her shoulder Jun said, "A pawn?"

"Huh." Joe circled her shoulders with his arm and chuckled. "Like me."

"Don't take it that way," Jun said into his chest, her fingers clenched on his waistband. "Please don't take it that way."

"The shunt, you letting me out of the headquarters, you meeting me here. It's all--"

"I couldn't set you up," Jun said. She took his face between her hands. "Let me call Ryu."

And then he woke up.

Dr. Holliday stood over him in her bathrobe and a doctor's coat, a surgical mask dangling from her neck. His night vision had been corrected, allowing him to make out the sympathy on Dr. Holliday's soft-featured face.

His pain was gone and his arm bandaged. He could feel the hard curve

of the shunt in his forearm.

Dr. Holliday explained with a cooly guileless expression that a petite tech had delivered the shunt and the drugs that went in it. Gave him a refill and ushered him down the back stairs and out of her office.

His wristcom burdened him with its silence. He stood in the shadows, watching his car and the street it was on, waiting. Shattered glass covered his car. The streetlamp above it had been broken. He let himself fade into view, broke into a run, dropped to the ground and rolled.

The assassins were good. He wasn't bullet proof, and he couldn't tell from where they were coming, but he knocked one off her feet and into another and for once was screaming as he fought, in the zone where will, action and flow became one.

They went down faster than anticipated, folding in upon themselves at the places of impact, saliva, sweat and blood arcing through the air, sliding off the slick waxed car and staining the dusty ground.

Looking down at all the bodies Joe grabbed his hair. "Fuck," he growled. "Fuck, fuck, good for nothing piece of--" How the hell was he going to be taken captive by Galactor if he kept killing their agents?

Hearing rumbling from the southwest, Joe looked up in time to see the God Phoenix pierce the sky like the needle, racing ahead of the sound.

Joe jumped into the car to drive to the race track. Even for that time of night it was quiet. None of the familiar night noises, and his trailer was gone from its spot, a rectangle of flattened withered grass where it used to be.

One last time, Joe told himself, as he drove onto the track. One last time, and he started his engine and raced himself around the track until Galactor came to take him away.

Explosions to the left and right of him he took as applause and the illusion held as the green-garbed ruffians dragged him out of the ruins of his borrowed car. He intended to let them capture him quietly, but with their fearful expressions and hesitant approach, he couldn't take it and before he knew it he was hitting someone in the chin with his heel. Ramming the side of his hand into throats. Killing his enemies with a joy so grim it was lust.

11. Ten

10.

"Where'd you get that?" Ken asked, eyeing the unfamiliar key Jun held between her fingers.

Jun closed her fist around it. Moved her hand and held it point out between her knuckles. "Joe's trailer."

At his questioning look she continued, "Nambu had it brought in from the race track. Galactor'd already got to it, but this key was in there. I thought I should hold onto it."

It looked like a safety deposit box key.

"Nambu know?"

Jun nodded.

"Nambu's calling us off the search for Joe."

Her eyes closed. When she opened them they looked black.

"We're are we going?"

"The Himalayas. Cross Karacorum."

"What's in In-- Galactor Headquarters?"

Involuntarily, a small smile came to Ken's face. "We got a bird scramble."

Jun clasped her hands together in pained excitement. Joe did it. He succeeded.

"That big plot Dr. Nambu thought the monster mech in R-city was a cover-up for? Katse's been dropping bombs into the earth's core. He wants to collapse the planet."

One of Jun's eyes closed and she winced, touching her index and middle fingers to her temple.

"Katse won't succeed." Ken assured her.

"Galactor scientists have accomplished some amazing, frightening things."

"We will stop Katse. Once and for all." Ken crossed his arms over his chest.

Jun made a few quick mental calculations. "...Thousands." She cocked her head, "Tens of thousands could die from the earthquakes, tsunamis."

"We'll save them."

"All of them?" she asked.

Ken looked so disappointed she added hastily, "I know, I know, we do our best. And Joe?" she had to ask.

At that Ken looked away.

The ground was shaking. His fingers burned numbly. His jaw hurt. His neck, too. His forehead felt mushy and a spiky spider- web shaped lattice of pain radiated from the back of his skull across his face and below. His eyes were caked shut. He didn't have to look at the wrist of his pulped hand to know that some of the ceramics of the shattered wristband had fused to his skin.

The mattress beneath him shook. It wasn't his mattress. It was a floor. A stone floor. A stone floor that smelled like Nepal.

He groaned. Tasted vomit in the back of his throat and rolled to the edge of his bed, so he could spit on the floor. The bed wobbled so hard he couldn't peer over. He flopped his hand on the mattress to steady himself, screamed as the fractured bones of his left hand pinched his flesh and remembered.

He wasn't in bed. He was on Everest. Cross Karacorum. Katse's lair. Galactor headquarters. Joe spat in his hand and slimed the blood sealing his eye shut away and he knew he wasn't dreaming anymore. He'd been beaten up too badly. Was shivering so hard, had been shot too many times for this to be anything but his life.

He remembered now. He'd been captured, beaten, brought before Katse and shot, and the stupid assholes had still managed to let him get away.

He was missing time, though.

From the ache in his face and shoulders the goons must have pounded on him after he lost consciousness. His chest felt like it'd been catching riflebutts and his ribs were numb. The wobbling thing beneath him was the ground, not his mattress. He heard the crump of explosives. It sounded like it was two chambers away. The floor sank beneath him and the room tilted. He slid fast and hard toward an open door. He was going to hit the door, probably catch one of his broken ribs on it. He prepared for the impact, his body sluggish. There was another crump, closer now, and the chamber tilted level, stopping his momentum. Everything went quiet. Joe couldn't even hear his heart.

Joe lay his cheek against the cool floor and started counting. He reached ten and nothing had happened. His clear eye narrowed. He started counting again, marking time with his thumb.

Like a sudden cramp, voices sounded in the hall. Low and tense, they belonged to Galactor. Joe reached around him, feeling for feather shuriken on his person. They were always on his person. It was slightly bent. His only one just in time, because it was in his gut that a teammate was nearby. Being so close to death, he knew it hadn't taken him because it was also waiting for her.

His limbs wouldn't move.

"No, no, no."

Joe wished his thigh up. It only twitched. He took a deep breath. The pain sprang deep and evil within him. His mouth jerked open. Bright blood and mucous splattered the ground in front of him. His vision grayed.

The goons outside were very quiet, expectation perked in the air. He could smell them, excitement and satisfaction. His bowels turned to water, his tensed thigh jittered. Jun was gonna die if he didn't do something. She was gonna be as bad as him if he didn't do something. Anything. "Please, God," Joe breathed. "Our Mary," he gasped. "Mama, Papa, please."

Nothing worked, and his eyes were sliding shut. That wicked pain in gut, the trickle of, ohgod itwaspiss, down his leg and nothing worked.

"Fucking help me, please," he wheezed and wedged his shattered hand beneath him and lifted, light as a feather, out of his brokenness. There was something warm on his lip. He brushed it off, blood, with the back of his bad hand.

"Get up," Joe told himself.

Alarms rang. He heard the useless running of useless Galactors as they tried to make sense of the mayhem his people, his team, was making in their headquarters. Joe smiled through his broken jaw. Spit into his good hand, and rubbed at the blood and vitreous humour sealing his other eye shut. He could not have smiled wider if he was pissing on Berg Katse's grave.

He flitted to the doorway, through the doorway, trailing piss and shit and blood as he sprinted to join Jun.

His angel, the Swan, bodies to the left of her, bodies to the right, her chin high and imperious as she waited for the knife to fall and for her life to end among the mainframes of the cavern floor.

The shuriken caught the goon cleanly and it hit the ground quickly, right after Joe did.

"Joji!" Jun screamed, her small gloved hands slapping his cheeks. "Joji, please, wake up. Please don't do this."

It was warm and he was dry and he was tired.

"Joji, please. Joji, open your eyes."

His eyes weren't working anymore, but he heard Jun speak into her wristcom, telling Ken and the others to quick come join them, and he wanted to wait, he did. But he smelled vetiver, rose water and jasmine, and felt his father's shoulder under his chin.

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End
file.